

PREFACE

just estimate of the real reward of virtue, or the real punishment of vice. That the great are not as happy as they seem, that the external circumstances of fortune and rank do not constitute felicity, is asserted by every moralist: the historian can seldom, consistently with his dignity, pause to illustrate this truth; it is therefore to the biographer we must have recourse. After we have beheld splendid characters playing their parts on the great theatre of the world, with all the advantages of stage effect and decoration, we anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes, that we may take a nearer view of the actors and actresses.

Some may perhaps imagine that the value of biography depends upon the judgment and taste of the biographer; but on the contrary it may be maintained, that the merits of a biographer are inversely as the extent of his intellectual powers and of his literary talents. A plain unvarnished tale is preferable to the most highly ornamented narrative. Where we see that a man has the power, we may naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us; and those who are used to literary manufacture know how much is often sacrificed to the rounding of a period, or the pointing of an antithesis.

That the ignorant may have their prejudices as well as the learned cannot be disputed; but we see and despise vulgar errors: we never bow to the authority of him who has no great name to sanction his absurdities. The partiality which blinds a biographer to the defects of his hero, in proportion as it is gross, ceases to be dangerous; but if it be concealed by the appearance of candour, which men of great abilities best know how to assume, it endangers our judgment sometimes, and sometimes our morals. If her Grace the Duchess of Newcastle, instead of penning her lord's elaborate eulogium, had undertaken to write the life of Savage, we should not have been in any danger of mistaking an idle, ungrateful libertine for a man of genius.

**The English
Comédie Humaine**

**CASTLE RACKRENT
AND
THE ABSENTEE**

**BY
MARIA EDGEWORTH**

The English Comédie Humaine

Masterpieces of the great English novelists in which are portrayed the varying aspects of English life from the time of Addison to the present day: a series analogous to that in which Balzac depicted the manners and morals of his French contemporaries.



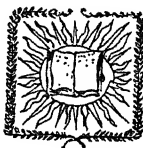


‘Love to sit on my knee whilst I told him stories.’

The English Comédie Humaine

CASTLE RACKRENT

BY
MARIA EDGEWORTH



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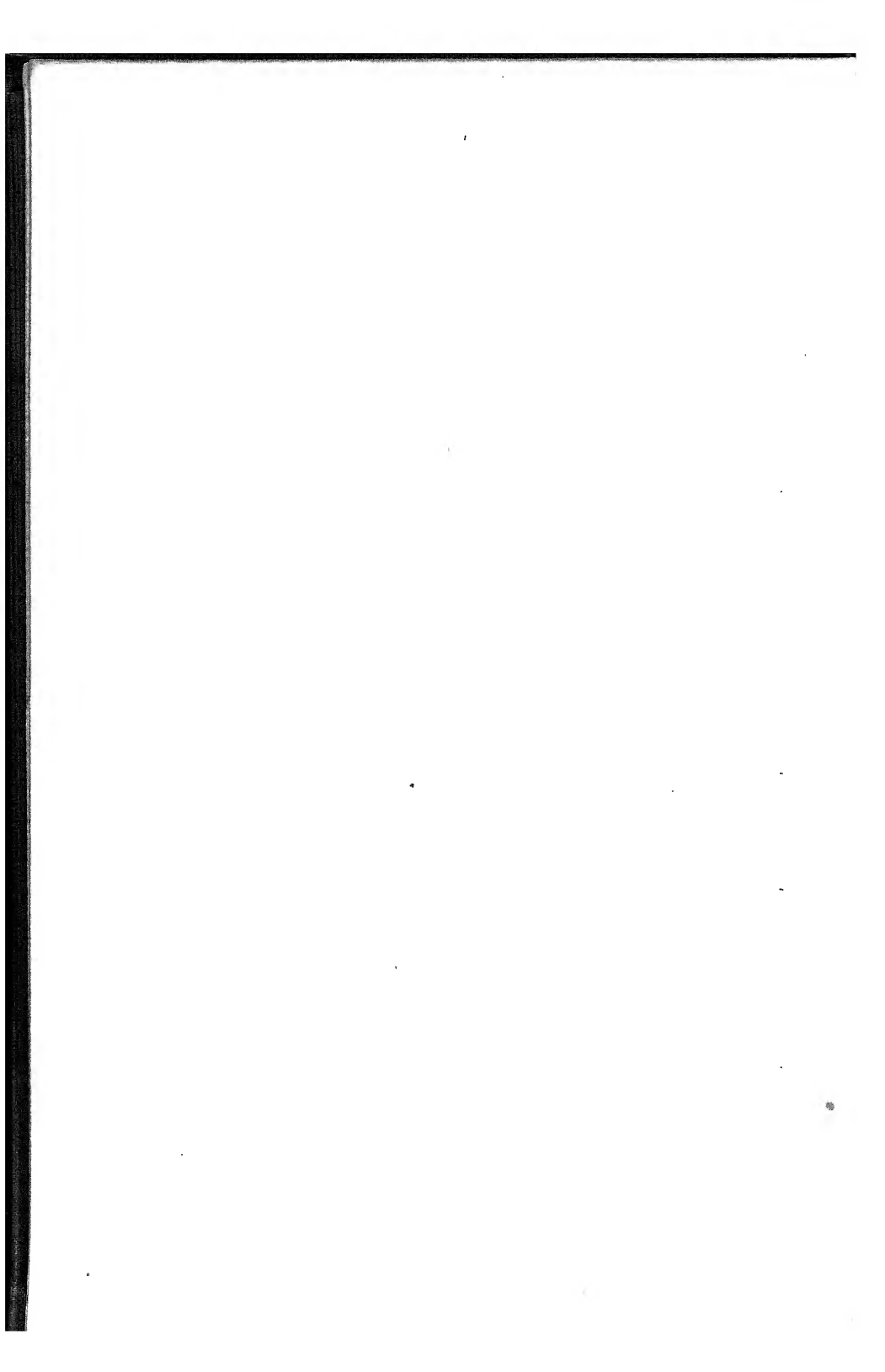
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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

MARIA EDGEWORTH, famous as a delineator of Irish character, was of English birth, though of Irish descent, being born at Black Bourton in Oxfordshire in 1767. Her early education also was English; but in her sixteenth year her father returned to Ireland to reside, taking her with him, and thereafter her home was at Edgeworthstown in County Longford, where she died in 1849. She is perhaps even better known as a writer of stories for children — stories which have retained in large measure their popularity — than as a novelist.

Her most notable tale was also the first published — "Castle Rackrent," issued in 1800 — a story based upon facts, and depicting the manners and methods of the Irish squire of the middle of the eighteenth century. It at once became famous and has become established among the masterpieces of fiction. It abounds in wit, graphic narration, and keen insight into the Irish national character. "It is a page torn from the national history of Ireland, immutable, perennially delightful, equally humorous and pathetic, holding up with shrewd wit and keen perception" both the follies and the virtues which have made that history what it has been. Among her later works, the most important are the "Tales from Fashionable Life," among which is "The Absentee," published in 1812. Each of these tales — which have been regarded as the earliest examples of "the novel with a purpose" — was written to enforce a moral, but they are not the less charming for their didacticism. "The Absentee," in particular, is a masterpiece worthy to be placed beside "Castle Rackrent."



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THE prevailing taste of the public for anecdote has been censured and ridiculed by critics who aspire to the character of superior wisdom; but if we consider it in a proper point of view, this taste is an incontestable proof of the good sense and profoundly philosophic temper of the present times. Of the numbers who study, or at least who read history, how few derive any advantage from their labours! The heroes of history are so decked out by the fine fancy of the professed historian; they talk in such measured prose, and act from such sublime or such diabolical motives, that few have sufficient taste, wickedness, or heroism, to sympathise in their fate. Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated ancient or modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes. We cannot judge either of the feelings or of the characters of men with perfect accuracy, from their actions or their appearance in public; it is from their careless conversations, their half-finished sentences, that we may hope with the greatest probability of success to discover their real characters. The life of a great or of a little man written by himself, the familiar letters, the diary of any individual published by his friends or by his enemies, after his decease, are esteemed important literary curiosities. We are surely justified, in this eager desire, to collect the most minute facts relative to the domestic lives, not only of the great and good, but even of the worthless and insignificant, since it is only by a comparison of their actual happiness or misery in the privacy of domestic life that we can form a